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A MID-VICTORIAN CRITIC

If you glance at the frontispiece of his *Essays*, you will be likely to call him a "mid-Victorian". He looks out at you, quietly austere, as if from his desk at Trinity College. He wears that extraordinary scarf of the fifties, and his beard—to modern eyes—is a scandal. The face is serious, kindly. Beneath the portrait is scrawled: "Truly yours, George Brimley." Who was he?

The dedication on the next page tells us that he was the friend of Frederick Denison Maurice. And a hasty survey of the chapter-titles of the little green volume proves him to have been a critic of literature. This book is all that stands between George Brimley and oblivion. It has at least done that. These essays are concerned with great men of letters: Tennyson, Byron, Wordsworth, Patmore, Carlyle, Thackeray, Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, Kingsley, John Wilson, and Comte. A humble book; but its essays, contributed to *Frazer's* and the *Spectator* in the fifties, have placed Brimley in the histories of English literature. In these he is always mentioned, and I have never known him to be mentioned without respect. "Had he been granted a longer life and better health", says Hugh Walker, "George Brimley might have made a great name." Brimley was not a great critic, but great critics are few. His position in English criticism is distinct and honorable.

That gentle—and orthodox—face suggests the mood of Brimley's life,—and of his criticism. It was a short life, only thirty-eight years; sheltered, but saddened by a terrible disease. He never wrote, so far as I know, a piece of creative literature. But he spent his life among books; handling them, reading them, and writing about them. Books were his work, his solace, his delight. There is little else to chronicle. His gentleness; his patience under suffering; his faith in accepted truths; his freedom from eccentricity;—these do not distinguish him from many others of his age. He was like many, too, in that he seems to have been unshaken by the subversive thought of his time. "I believe," says a friend, "he was an unusually good man, whose goodness was not always prominent to the ordinary observer, but who was,

intrinsically, faithful, true, brave, and affectionate." Brimley delighted in the peaceful contemplation of literature. In the essay on *Tennyson's Poems*, he writes of:—

" . . . those hours, with cultivated and genial friends, in which the cares of the world are shaken off, and the best memories of the past, the noblest aspirations, the gentlest feelings revive amid mountain and lake, for the votaries of ambition, science, or business."

If his picture and his biography persuade us that George Brimley may be conveniently classified as mid-Victorian, a reading of his book would probably rivet our conviction. His criticism is, first of all, *moral*. He believes that art should always teach us something. At times his essays seem a very fair brief for orthodoxy and the established religion; they might, we think, have received the imprimatur of any Christian bishop. Brimley is not sanctimonious; he merely tests literature by the ways of righteousness.

This makes a difference. A moral point of view in criticism cannot take the place of disinterestedness, and its presence makes parts of Brimley curious reading. The fault is obvious in *Tennyson's Poems*, his first essay. Brimley attacks the *Poems* of 1833 for their lack of ethical motive. A poet, we gather, who has Tennyson's "noble view of human character and destiny", should be more careful. Brimley could not find the text of *The Lady of Shalott*. Its beauty, so he declared, only makes us "more angry that so much skill in presenting objects should be employed upon a subject that can only amuse the imagination." Listen further to his solemn displeasure at Tennyson's early experiments in the lyric. *Fatima*, poor poem, had "neither beginning, middle, nor end". Who would not like to see *Fatima* more Aristotelian? or "airy, fairy Lilian" with a moral ending? Just here the browser in nineteenth-century criticism is likely to lay the book aside.

Piety of this sort weighs down a large part of the essay on Tennyson. The lesson of *The Palace of Art* is imperfect,—a criticism which sent Mr. Saintsbury into a paroxysm. Tennyson has given us only "a catalogue *raisonnée*, richly illuminated". The interest of the poem should have been placed "upon the de-

velopment of the law in operation". Brimley thinks *The Gardener's Daughter* a perfect epithalamion. His praise is long drawn out and full of linked sweetness. The following rhapsody is typical of Brimley's softer style:—

"Mr. Tennyson's glory is to have portrayed passion with a feminine purity,—to have spiritualized the voluptuousness of the senses and the imagination by a manly reverence for woman's worth, and a clear intuition of 'the perfect law of liberty' through which the true humanity develops itself in the form and condition of an animal nature. He religiously observes the sanctities of love, and in graceful pictures"—

upholds the saints and the sacred traditions of the fathers, one almost adds in weariness. The trouble is that Brimley's sermons, while profound, are monotonously alike. *Locksley Hall*, *Love and Duty*, *The Princess*,—all illustrate for Brimley "universal laws of life".

In the other essays Brimley continues to sound the loud timbrel of righteousness. He recognizes a hardness in Wordsworth's nature, but this eulogy might be placed, with changed names, in any hagiology, so worshipful is the critic's attitude. The study of Wordsworth is largely biographical, and some extreme tributes to the poet's personal life have an ironical sound now in these days of unsparing research. The essay on *The Angel in the House* shows Brimley's moral tendency altered into something rich and strange,—strange at least for literary criticism. The paper has thirty-three pages. The poem under consideration is mentioned first on the twenty-ninth page, and sketchily described for the remaining four pages. The first twenty-eight pages form a dithyrambic on the happiness of married life, including philippics against triangle situations and betrothed couples. An engaging discussion, if you like, of the state ordained in man's innocence, but a top-heavy introduction to a review of four pages.

Brimley cannot get away from the moral point of view. In *Carlyle's Life of Sterling*, the first of the briefer essays, he takes offence at Carlyle's emphasis upon Sterling's heterodoxy. He thumps Bulwer-Lytton roundly for falsely representing English

social conditions. This is a severe arraignment from Brimley, usually so mild:—

“Dandy literature and superfine sensibilities are tokens and causes of a degenerate art and an emasculate morality; and among offenders in this way none has sinned more, or is of higher mark for a gibbet, than the author of *My Novel*.”

Dickens and John Wilson, Brimley thinks, sacrifice too much to be entertaining, and Comte he places, naturally, in outer darkness. Indeed, Brimley is rather helpless before strongly original or speculative thought. He fancies that Byron's wild performance was designed to show mankind the folly of rebellion. And Comte shocks him so deeply that his reply is hardly sensible. He reverts not to logic, but to pious hope; to what all our wishes bid us believe, but concerning which we do not know.

“If a practical test of the positive creed be wanted, there is one ready at hand. Let any one follow to the grave the wife, the child, the parent he has loved and lost, and seek to comfort himself by the reflection that the loved one is absorbed in the *grand être*—in the totality of organized life, life existing through all time in the universe. No!”

Brimley's emotion is noble, but it is not a reply to Comte. One can guess the reply of John Stuart Mill to logic of this kind.

Brimley seems more characteristic of the period in still another way,—his manner of writing. The digression of twenty-eight pages in the essay on Patmore has been noticed. It makes one cry out in painful recognition: “*Fraser's!*” or “*The Edinburgh!*” Anyone who has read these periodicals has wondered about the connection between caption and contents. But Brimley's kinship with a popular style is more pronounced in his diction. The far-flung sentences; the array of words; the defensive tone,—these were commonplaces of the writing of the day. Brimley's manner is too humble. Even when his judgment is most acute, he is apologetic. There is too little fight in him. He weakens his admirable defence of *Maud* by timidity in the face of the adjectives “morbid” and “hysterical”. But, most of all, notice the elaborate manner, the phrase piled upon phrase. The curses of *Locksley Hall* are—

“not the poisonous exhalations of a corrupted nature, but the thunder and lightning that clear the air of what is foul, the forces by which a loving and poetical mind, not yet calmed and strengthened by experience and general principles, repels unaccustomed outrage and wrong. With what a rich emotion he recalls his only recollections! Sea, sandy shore, and sky have been for him a perpetual fountain of beauty and joy, his youth a perpetual feast of imaginative knowledge and pictorial glory.”

Here occurs a large section of the poem. Then more exclamations:—

“With what a touching air of tenderness and protection he watches the young girl whom he loves in secret, and whose paleness and thinness excite his pity as well as his hope. How rapturously—”

But I break off exhausted; there is still another page of this threnody.

Elsewhere is a fusillade of nouns and adjectives to convey one fact,—that Wordsworth admired Desdemona:—

“In all that mighty symphony of maidenly admiration, [Brimley remarks of Shakespeare,] of manly love, of stately age, of vigorous youth, of calm domestic peace, of ‘the pride, pomp, circumstance of glorious war’, of boundless faith, of agonising jealousy, of wrath, hate, fondness, and despair, all blending into one complex devouring passion, he knew but the simple melody of the flute. In that woof of death. . . . that marvellous and many-sided sided picture. . . .”

Is all this captious? Why should a respectable writer be so exhibited many years after his work is done? Because it is important to notice that, in spite of these faults, George Brimley has a distinct place in English criticism. What I have to say in Brimley’s behalf cannot counterbalance in mere space all that has been said of his faults: that he applies the moral test too frequently; that he is prolix and sentimental. But the defence outweighs the prosecution; it exhibits in Brimley the first quality essential to a good critic.

This, even with all his “mid-Victorianism”! But before we examine this critical power it is well to modify our broad classification

of Brimley. His faults were real enough. They are what we like to call 'mid-Victorian' faults. Sometimes in reading of the fifties it seems that they were more obvious then than at any other period. And yet—last night I read an English review which was nothing if not 'mid-Victorian'. The truth is that these faults are of all time. I believe that I could point out some excellent Greeks, Romans, Elizabethans, and moderns who are 'mid-Victorians', as we absurdly use the term. Brimley would have been Brimley, whatever the age.

His power lay in this: he penetrated with unusual insight the enduring qualities of his contemporaries. It is noteworthy that all his criticisms dealt with writers who are now receiving their real rating; he was concerned with the great Victorians. In almost every case, in spite of moral bias and verbiage, his verdict is that of posterity. In the babel of criticism in the fifties his was one of the few voices to speak the truth.

Take, for instance, *Tennyson's Poems*, Brimley's best essay. In the forties readers bought Tennyson's poems, but it must be remembered that many powerful critics were hostile. During these years Tennyson had a severe struggle for recognition. Carlyle opposed him; so did Fitzgerald; and Taine. *Maud*, of which Brimley writes so discerningly, was especially unpopular. Brimley tells his readers very definitely why Tennyson is great. We must forget his mannerisms and observe carefully what he says of the successive editions of the poems. It will then be found that his analysis of such a poem as *Mariana* is sympathetic and sound.

"The minute enumeration of detail is an excellence, because no other means could so forcibly mark the isolation, the morbid sensitiveness, and the mind vacant of all but misery. . . . The landscape expresses the mood of the mind that contemplates it."

Brimley arrived at such judgments independently, and he spoke out.

Brimley wrote as significantly of Wordsworth, although in the forties this poet was more firmly established than Tennyson. Wilson, among others, had proclaimed him, with Scott and Byron, "one of the three great master-spirits of our day in the

poetical world". Yet it was not many years since Jeffrey was saying: "This will never do", when he was declaring that the *Ode on Intimations of Immortality* was illegible and unintelligible, and the *Ode to Duty* meaningless. What Jeffrey had said was still believed or felt instinctively by many readers: "the debasement of childish language, mean incident, and incongruous images". The influence of Brimley's essay on Wordsworth is difficult to measure; it was probably not widespread. But the credit is none the less Brimley's to have seen clearly and spoken wisely concerning a poet who even now is somewhat misunderstood.

Brimley's other judgments wear well. Who will quarrel with this passage on Thackeray?—

"*Esmond* will, we think, rank higher as a work of art than either *Vanity Fair* or *Pendennis*; because the characters are of a higher type, and drawn with a greater finish, and the book is more of a complete whole: not that we anticipate for it anything like the popularity of the former of these two books, as it is altogether of a graver cast, the satire is not so pungent, the canvas is far less crowded, and the subject is distant and unfamiliar; and may be, its excellence will not help it to a very large public."

Moreover, on the art of criticism itself Brimley is curiously in advance of the other critics who preceded Matthew Arnold. This seems, indeed, like a premature word from Arnold on a favorite subject:—

"As to questions of form we have already stated that rhythm, metre, and all that constitutes the mode of expression rather than the substance . . . are spontaneous, natural signs of a singer's emotion. . . . All then we have to ask ourselves in reference to the form of a particular poem is, whether it does so express the emotion of the writer, and what quality and degree of emotion it expresses—that of a great soul raised to the height of a subject, or of a little soul vainly striving to warm its thin blood, but puny, starved, and shivering, even in the presence of the central fires of the universe."

If Brimley is here abreast of Matthew Arnold, he is ahead of him in another judgment. He foresaw the immortality of Shelley.

To appreciate Shelley's poetry is one thing; to tell why is another. It was Matthew Arnold's misfortune as a critic to fail signally in both regards: to find little in his poetry to admire, and to prophesy of him falsely. Arnold had no doubt that Byron would outlive Shelley, who was, he declared, "as incoherent as darkness itself". The understanding of the humbler critic went deeper. We will leave our 'mid-Victorian' with his tribute to Shelley, a tribute worthy in its fine flight of imagination, and in its truth, of any critic of the nineteenth century. It explains better than any single passage why Brimley will live as a critic of literature:—

"After the passions and the theories which supplied Shelley with the subject-matter of his poems have died away and become mere matters of history, there will still remain a song, such as mortal man never sung before, of inarticulate rapture and of freezing pain,—of a blinding light of truth and a dazzling weight of glory, translated into English speech, as coloured as a painted window, as suggestive, as penetrating, as intense as music."

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